

**T**he art of writing scripts lies in the imagination and the ability to visualise an idea as a workable treatment for a film. The script is the mental picture you should have of the film and is like a dry run using an imaginary projector in your head. To do it well you really have got to be able to visualise your ideas and see them as a sequence of events. As most flashes of inspiration come at random (usually with long gaps separating the ideas), it is logical to write them down so that they can be assembled on paper and written up at a later date. So far we have been talking about visuals, but of course all scripts must cover what, if any, sound is required, as a lot of additional information can be supplied to the audience through speech/effects and music.

Sound and picture are not only two distinct aspects of the film making medium, they are also quite obviously two different senses. Sound on its own can very easily tell a story, but since the medium we work on is film, we are not using its full creative advantage if meaning is not exposed primarily through the visuals. Therefore, at the scripting stage let us forget that we have sound as an extra weapon in the story-telling process. The advantage of viewing it this way is there is less chance of scripting-in any superfluous sound. In a way you can argue that sound has gradually destroyed the art of the visual film. The book *Film As Art* by Rudolf Arnheim (Faber & Faber) sets out to make a strong case for this, highlighting that it is easier to tell the audience something verbally than try and describe it visually, and to do so is to deprive your audience of something they expect to see. This is true even though they won't necessarily be able to define what it was that was lacking in the film. My argument would be that it is best to balance the two, but only after the script has been written with as little emphasis as possible on the role of sound. The story will then have been laid on stronger visual foundations and sound will only help to serve to improve the overall structure.

### NOT EASY

How to go about creating a film from an idea or series of ideas is not easy, nor very definable as a set of guidelines. The basic rule has to be though to write everything down immediately on whatever first comes to hand. Even if it is only a key word, prop, descriptive sentence *etc.*, jot it down. At least this way this should be enough at a later date for you to remember those initial thoughts. Often, however, these notes will only contain an individual scene or element of a story which could not be scripted into a full story. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because if you look carefully at those films or pieces of literature we hold as being 'good' then you see that they are in fact made up of usually three or four very interesting elements which have been

# SILENT MOVIE

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Jonathan Cook feels that scripting for sound can spoil a film. Why not improvise a 'Silent Movie'?

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cleverly linked and woven together to form a single story.

It is the strands that have been selected in isolation that when all placed together at the same time form a

complete story. Examples of such threads might be the main character is a drunk, that he has just been made unemployed, that his wife has now left him *etc.* Bring all of these ideas





together and you can see they would form a better story than just showing the life of a drunk. Often a common denominator is necessary to make all the elements you have chosen seem logical and not deliberately contrived. A 'key idea' file with all those random scribbles collected and stored will pay off handsome dividends. I normally wait until there are about half a dozen of these notes before I sit down and try to decide if anything can be made of them.

### FLOW CHART

The best way to go about assembling these into a story, when you have chosen a few of the parts you like best, is to align them on a piece of paper as a linear chain of events, or flow chart. The advantage of seeing the story laid out in this way are twofold. Firstly, you can see if the various segments flow well into each other and, secondly, how best to rearrange them if not. Once you are

satisfied that you have at least built up the basis for a good film, you can then go onto writing the script itself, safe in the knowledge you will not be wasting your time by suddenly finding that as you get to the end of the story, that the last sequence is not a logical progression or satisfactory conclusion to the story. Scripted characterisation will always help the audience to identify with the film itself. If, unfortunately, the plot doesn't really allow for the audience to identify with the character(s), (ie it is mostly action and movement), then the best way of overcoming this is to have a number of key scenes deliberately written in which require us to see close ups of the characters' facial expressions, such as in a car chase; the look of fear, for instance, can speak volumes. The old theory that every story should have a beginning, middle and end is still undeniably true. However, it doesn't necessarily have to be in that order, if you see what I mean! As long as the three elements are present at some stage or another, then I believe

this is sufficient; they are merely recognisable stages on any good plot, because they are necessary for the audience's understanding. Most stories should also contain conflict, the narrative puzzle that must be solved or resolved by at least the end of the film. Each character must be given as much personality as possible, so that the audience can become familiar with them, and associate with the problems you present them with. From the opening sequence the film should be progressing to the end without any apparent artificial obstacles, or without immediate clues to the conclusion.

Finally, scripting for dialogue. I have left mentioning this to last because of the minor role it should play in the initial draft. It should be added, perhaps, to a later more detailed outline you have prepared, where it seems illogical for the story to progress without its use. If the audience isn't already enjoying your silent film then you can go until you are blue in the face trying to pep it up or salvage what you can through explaining the story with dialogue, because it just will not work! (This is true even for the professional film-maker who can normally beat an amateur hands down at the art of writing convincing dialogue.) Always bear in mind the script is the film and the film is the script and both should work, because of the reliance on the visual image in the endeavour to try and tell a story as if it really happened. ■

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Mel Brookes' *Silent Movie*. One of the most notable comedies of recent years, this film relied entirely on visual appeal for its humour

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Chaplin's *Modern Times*. He continued to make silent films well after the dawning of the sound era

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